

It was a strange scene last March when Dexter Scott King, the youngest son of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., shook hands with convicted assassin James Earl Ray. Live, in front of CNN cameras, Dexter professed his belief in the innocence of the aged man who has been imprisoned for 29 years for Dr. King's murder. It was stranger still when Dexter went back on TV three months later and suggested that President Lyndon B. Johnson was part of an elaborate plot to kill his father. But then, these are strange times for Dexter King and his family.

Once revered as the last blood link to the civil rights prophet, the King family has seen its credibility shaken by its blessing of Ray. Yet the alliance with the killer is just the latest in a series of audacious

moves that 36-year-old Dexter King has made since taking over the family's power base, the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, in Atlanta. He has turned his father's crusade for racial justice into an enterprise that some say only exploits his father's name. Dexter's initiatives include selling the preliminary film rights for Dr. King's life story to director Oliver Stone, exacting fees from media that use his celebrated "I Have a Dream" speech, and contracting with Time Warner, Inc., to market books, recordings, and CD-ROMs of Dr. King's speeches.

Many of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s admirers are troubled by the new direction of the King legacy, fearful that money may be the sole motivation behind these projects—including the bid to win freedom for Ray, the small-time thief convicted of shooting King on a balcony of Memphis's Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968.

While covering the South for the *Boston Globe*, I was in Atlanta following Dexter's meeting with Ray, and heard of widespread suspicion in the city's black community that the Kings' involvement in the case was simply designed to hype the possible movie. "Why declare interest now?" one prominent Atlantan asked me before providing an answer. "Their main interest is to whip up interest in the Oliver Stone project."

Dexter's June appearance on the ABC newsmagazine *Turning Point* bolstered these beliefs. In a colloquy with anchor Forrest Sawyer, Dexter pinned

his father's murder on the same forces that were shown as plotting President Kennedy's death in Stone's movie *JFK*.

"Whom does the King family blame for Dr. King's death?" Sawyer asked.

"I am told that it was part and parcel army intelligence, CIA, FBI..." Dexter replied.

"Do you believe that Lyndon Johnson was part of the plot to kill your father?"

"I do."

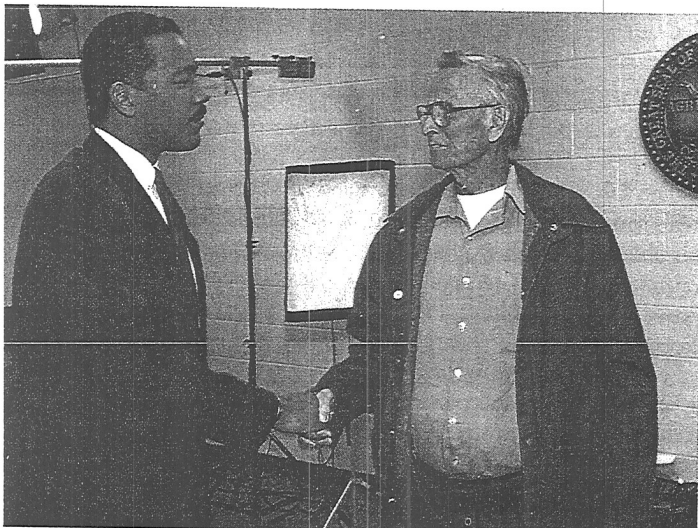
"Why?"

"Well," Dexter said, "based on the evidence that I've been shown, I would think that it would be very difficult for something of that magnitude to occur on his watch and he not be privy to it."

The curious case of the King legacy has almost biblical overtones, steeped as it is in blood and martyrdom, peopled with disciples and skeptics, and filled with promises of redemption and accusations of betrayal. The history of Martin Luther King, Jr., may be forever confused by it.

Americans have an abiding fascination with famous families. Some members of those families handle celebrity well; others crumple under the pressure. Since the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., members of his family have struggled with their inheritance as bearers of the dream.

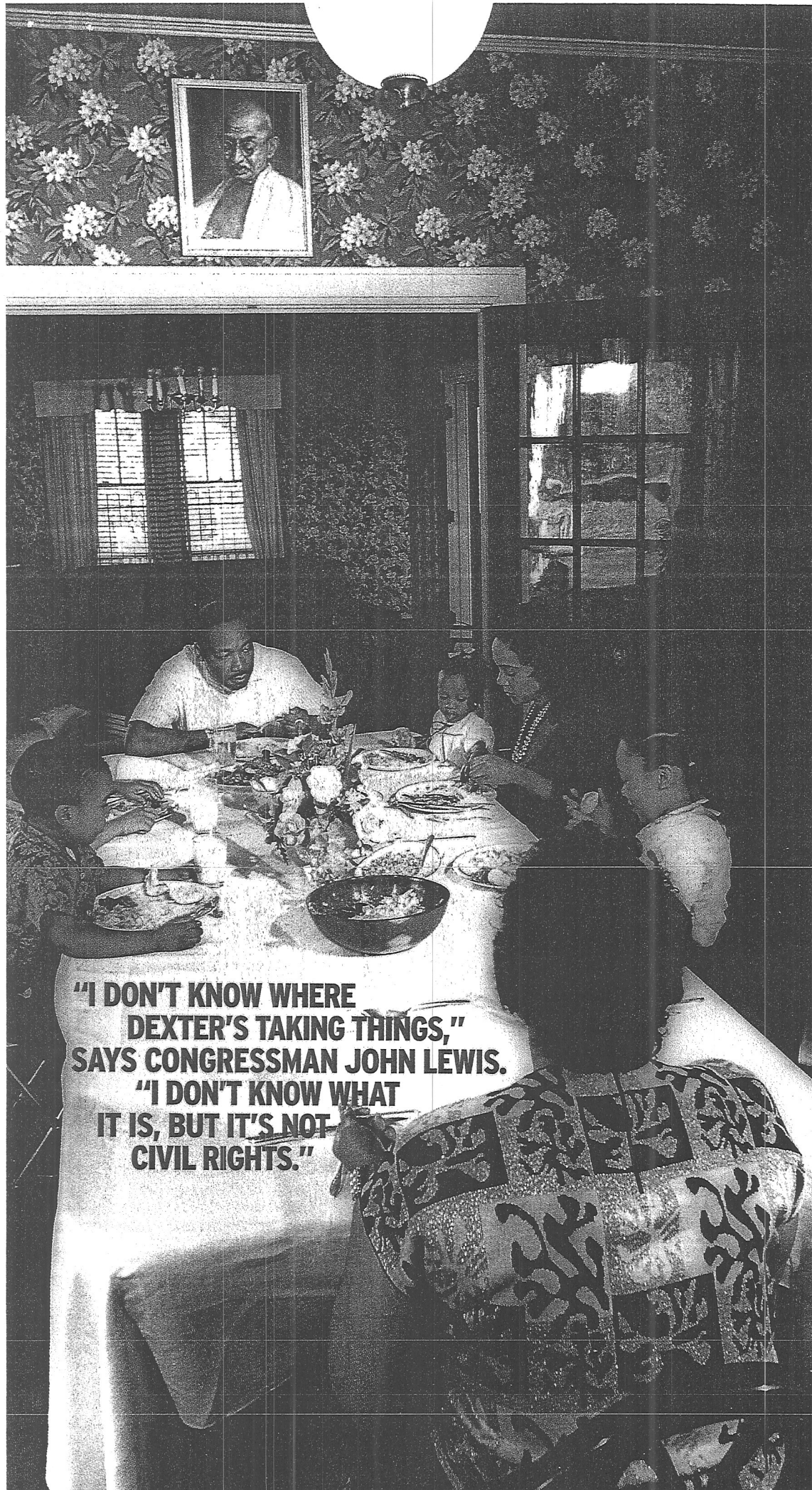
King's widow, Coretta Scott King, has quietly devoted herself to protecting her children—none of whom have married—and preserving her late husband's memory. In the years since his death, she has continued to live in their modest brick home on Sunset Avenue in Atlanta,



# THE SON KING

**DEXTER KING, THE SON OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., HAS TAKEN OVER THE AFFAIRS OF HIS HISTORIC FAMILY. NOW HE'S PLEADING THE CASE OF HIS FATHER'S ASSASSIN AND SUING THOSE WHO TRY TO SPREAD REVEREND KING'S WORDS. IS DEXTER KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE—OR TURNING IT INTO A NIGHTMARE?**

**BY CURTIS WILKIE**



**"I DON'T KNOW WHERE  
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where his clothes are said to still hang in the closet. Though Coretta King has occasionally endorsed political candidates, she has largely retreated from civic life.

Dexter's older brother, Martin Luther King III, 39, served as a Fulton County commissioner before a defeat in 1993. He is now chairman of Americans United for Affirmative Action and lives with his mother. The two King daughters, Yolanda Denise, 41, an actress in New York, and Bernice Albertine, 34, an Atlanta minister, have expressed no interest in running the King Center, according to family friends.

And so the legacy has been handed to Dexter. Tom Houck, an Atlanta political pundit who worked for Dr. King and has been a friend of Dexter's since he was a child, told me that Dexter was put in charge because "Coretta realized that of all the kids, Dexter was the one who would move the family forward."

Dexter King attended his father's alma mater Morehouse College, in Atlanta, but never graduated. Atlanta newspapers have reported that he left the school in 1981 for undisclosed "medical reasons." In interviews, Dexter has refused to discuss his departure.

Since Dexter usually avoids the press, only a little is known about him. He is a vegetarian who lives in a fashionable condominium near downtown Atlanta, reportedly draws a \$132,300 salary from the King Center, and drives both a Mercedes-Benz and a Lexus. He is often seen in the company of beautiful women. One of the figures Dexter admires most, Houck says, is Ted Turner, the swashbuckling *(continued on page 132)*

**Left: The King family in 1964. Right: Dr. King and Dexter. Below: Family adviser Phillip Jones.**



Dexter King playing with his father in 1964; and, earlier this year, shaking hands with convicted assassin James Earl Ray (opposite page).



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(continued from page 126) Atlanta who founded CNN.

The contrast between father and son is particularly striking to those of us who covered the civil rights movement in the 1960s. As a young journalist, I traveled through Mississippi writing about the fight against segregation, and I remember talking with King on one of the last days of his life. Although I worked for the *Clarksdale Press Register*, a small Mississippi daily, King spent a precious hour telling me of his hopes for the Poor People's Campaign, which would begin in that terrible spring of 1968—the onset of a period that would see the murder of both King and Robert F. Kennedy. Violence hung heavy in the air, and I asked King if he worried about his safety. Fear, he told me, would immobilize his movement, and he could not afford that.

Nearly three decades later, on the day in January 1995 that Dexter was formally installed as president of the King Center, I interviewed him, and the subject was not so lofty. At the time, the Kings were embroiled in a dispute with the National Park Service over a project in Atlanta's King Historic District. They were also litigants in lawsuits involving the use of King's words. Dexter and I met in a large room at the center. We sat in straight-back chairs facing each other, like adversaries in a chess match, but we had a pleasant conversation. The son bears a strong physical resemblance to his father—the same soulful eyes, the neat haircut and mustache, and the modulated speaking style. His father would gesture as he spoke, but Dexter kept his hands on his knees as he earnestly explained his family's reasons for trying to obtain fees for the use of King's writings and recorded speeches. His father, he pointed out, had copyrighted much of his work. "We have a responsibility to follow the conduct my father did," he said. "In death, his work has become so much more valuable."

Dexter acknowledged that the King Center, a combination of museum and archive, needed money. Congress had rejected a request to triple the center's annual allocation of \$535,000, and several major Atlanta businesses had cut back contributions because of discouraging physical conditions at the center and visitor complaints that there was nothing to see. Despite the financial pinch, Dexter said, "I don't believe we should be blatantly commercializing the legacy. We're not starting a business called Martin Luther King, Inc."

But when I returned to Atlanta last spring, I discovered that the King legacy had become a booming business. Dexter had purged several of his father's old associates from the board of directors of the King Center, I learned, and

was now taking his counsel from Phillip Jones, an aggressive young promoter who had parlayed their friendship at college into a business called Intellectual Properties Management, Inc., which zealously manages the King legacy.

I remembered Jones from my 1995 visit. At the time, he was functioning as Dexter's de facto spokesman. He was a smooth, fast-talking man—he and Dexter had formed a college partnership as music promoters—and he persuaded a reluctant Dexter to talk with me. When I contacted the King Center this year, I was told that Dexter was busy and would not be available for at least a month.

So I telephoned Jones, an ex-New Yorker who in the 1980s went by the music biz moniker P.J. Blue. He quickly recalled that I had quoted critics of the King family in a piece I had written some three years ago for the *Boston Globe* about King's legacy. Jones described it as "the most unbalanced article I read on that issue," and added, "I assume you are the enemy."

Jones argued that Dexter is the ideal person to carry King's dream into the twenty-first century. "He is a new paradigm," Jones said, who would move the message from the "Feel the spirit!" school of King's generation into a high-tech world. He sounded doubtful about the older ministers who faithfully preach King's words. "Those people don't have a clue how to get the message out on CD-ROM."

One of the people ousted from the board of the King Center in early 1995 was John Lewis, a 57-year-old veteran of the civil rights movement who is now a Georgia congressman. "I don't know where Dexter is taking things," Lewis says. "It all sounds commercial. I don't know what it is, but it's not civil rights."

Last January, a growing murmur of complaints over his handling of his father's history prodded Dexter to write an op-ed for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He claimed the King estate does not charge nonprofit groups for the use of King material and defended the fees charged to others. "Because my father owned no real property, his intellectual property is especially important as an asset," he wrote. "Criticizing his family is criticizing him."

But the family does have its critics. Mitch Skandalakis, who beat Martin Luther King III for a seat on the Fulton County Board of Commissioners, says he is disappointed that the Kings are not active in social movements. "The King family has not done a whole lot to advance anything other than the King family," Skandalakis says. "I don't see them speaking out on welfare reform or teenage pregnancy, and I think it's unfortunate."

Joseph L. Roberts, Jr., the senior pastor of

Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dexter's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather preached, cites a lack of mission at the King Center. "There is no specific plan of action," he argues. "The center has little comment to make on very heavy issues of nonviolence." During the Kings' fight with the park service, which also involved plans for an addition to the church, Roberts said that the family was "high-handed, dictatorial, and undemocratic." He was ousted from the center's board when Dexter took over. Friends say Dexter no longer attends Ebenezer, his family's spiritual home.

"The family is a tight circle, and they've drawn their wagons together," Roberts says. "They are exercising power and control based on paranoia."

Coretta Scott King first named Dexter president of the King Center on April 4, 1989, but he resigned within four months. He quit, Jones told me, because the center was "poorly managed." Dexter, however, told the *Journal-Constitution* that he left because his mother was unwilling to give up control.

Five years later, Coretta King reinstalled Dexter over the objection of some members of the center's board, who doubted his ability to assume such a role. This time, she made it clear that Dexter would have complete authority, and this time Dexter brought Jones with him.

The Kings' battle with the park service has typified their public activities since their formal association with Jones began. Over the years, tourists visiting the historic district had expressed dismay over the meager collection of King memorabilia on display at the center. So the park service negotiated with the city of Atlanta and Ebenezer church to obtain property across the street from the center to build a new visitor's space. Participants in the talks say family representatives sat in and raised no objections.

But the negotiators were startled in late 1994, the year that Jones's company was contracted to manage the King estate, when the family suddenly challenged the proposal and tried to claim the land for an interactive museum. After the park service proceeded, the family banished the service's tour guides from King's birthplace at 501 Auburn Avenue, as well as from the nearby King Center. "We feel strongly that the heritage of the civil rights movement is too important to be controlled by a governmental agency that has only superficial familiarity with the internal dynamics of our freedom struggle," the family said in a statement.

John Lewis finally helped broker a settlement, and the park service got its visitor's center,

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never asked to meet with them before because I knew they were going through pain. I paid their family respect. And there was mutual respect. Dexter told me he felt the same way.”

The Kings seem committed to winning Ray’s freedom. The family is said to have underwritten ballistics tests on a rifle—linked to Ray and identified as the weapon that killed King—in an effort to disprove his guilt. Conducted this summer, the tests were inconclusive. “Dexter really wants to put some closure—that’s the word he uses with me—on the case,” says Tom Houck. “Particularly before his mother passes on. He wants to know why his father was shot and who was responsible.”

Taylor Branch, the author of a magisterial history of King and the civil rights movement, *Parting the Waters*, fears the Kings’ intervention in the case will lead to false revisionism. “I think this is a very, very dangerous matter that they’re toying with,” he says. “It will unravel the one bit of certainty—that James Earl Ray pulled the trigger for racial reasons—and I think the last thing we’ll get is closure.”

As part of his offensive, Dexter has made several other extraordinary assertions on television. On the CNN show *Crossfire* in April, he declared that Raoul, who was supposed to have controlled the conspiracy to kill King, “has been located.” Dexter warned that “for fear of his safety, security, the fact that he might flee before being brought to justice, it’s very clear that this information has to be guarded.”

David J. Garrow, whose 1986 biography of King, *Bearing the Cross*, won a Pulitzer Prize and exposed many of the FBI’s attempts to subvert King, was also on the show. Garrow contended there was no doubt Ray was the gunman. After one exchange, Dexter suddenly said, “Mr. Garrow, I have been told and I am now more than ever convinced, is an agent for the national security and intelligence forces.”

When I spoke with Garrow later in his office at the Emory University Law School in Atlanta, he characterized Dexter’s allegation as “so loony it makes the most casual viewer say, ‘What’s wrong with him?’” Garrow, who once aided the family during an unsuccessful attempt to recover papers that King gave to Boston University, said, “I think there are two dimensions to Dexter’s position—an appetite for conspiratorial worldviews and an incredible defensiveness to public criticism. Coretta King always wanted to view the world as divided between those who are on the family payroll and those who are dangerous. History shows he’s his mother’s son.”

“Dexter’s sorted out in his mind,” says Houck, “you’re either for me or you’re against me.”

As Dexter goes about his business, his commercial efforts have been made largely in the name of the family estate rather than the King Center. According to those who are familiar with the arrangements, the income that accrues from the lawsuits, the movie, and the Time Warner deal will go to family members, with Phillip Jones also getting a substantial portion.

The King Center, meanwhile, continues to struggle. Located in a complex of brown brick buildings adjacent to King’s tomb, the center has a small museum and operates a handful of educational programs. To reduce the center’s deficit, the staff has been cut drastically since Dexter took over.

The center houses many of King’s papers, as well as other invaluable archives from the civil rights movement—the records of the SCLC and other organizations. Yet historians have been effectively barred from the library for several years, and scholars lament that the records are deteriorating. Garrow says that the library’s roof leaked and rodents prowled the stacks.

Jones acknowledged, this spring, that the archives had suffered water damage and had been handled badly before Dexter took over. He confirmed that library access was limited; there had been thefts of documents by visitors purporting to be historians, he said. Not only that, he explained, but “you don’t make money from archives.”

By July, he seemed to have found a way. The *New York Times* reported that Jones was negotiating with Emory, Stanford, and Boston University in an effort to transfer the center’s valuable collection to a school. Jones, apparently, was savoring the prospect of a bidding war. “There seems to be a competitive spirit involved in this that we didn’t anticipate,” he said.

The King family’s plans for an interactive museum called King Dream Center are also still on the drawing board. The *Wall Street Journal* reported this year that consultants had proposed a 90,000-square-foot “edutainment” complex that would charge a \$10 admission fee. The study suggested that the King Dream Center, with 3-D displays and a simulated freedom march, was capable of generating an annual \$3.2 million profit, money that could bail out the King Center. Jones says he is still seeking corporate sponsors for the project. One executive contacted by Jones told me that Jones had talked about his desire to create a high-profile persona for himself. “I had a bad sense the meeting was all about him” and had little to do with the Kings, said the executive, who asked not to be identified.

Meanwhile, Dexter King told the *Wall Street Journal* that if the King Dream Center

proved profitable, he would fund other groups to take over the work the King Center once attempted. The paper quoted Dexter as saying, “We’re not in the civil rights protection-of-rights business.”

Jones argues that Dexter has been unfairly criticized in the press for pursuing payments from newspapers, historians, and television producers who used King’s words. He contends that the Kings have moral as well as legal rights to the words, a position supported by a 1982 decision by the Georgia Supreme Court. The Kings brought the 1982 suit against a firm specializing in funeral accessories that sold busts of King. The court concluded that the King estate had the right to market King’s legacy and to prevent others from “unauthorized exploitation.” The King family, the court wrote, could not be denied the opportunity to make money off his name “merely because Dr. King chose not to exploit or commercialize himself during his lifetime.”

Even critics say the Kings are justified in blocking tawdry attempts to exploit King’s name; it is the family’s fierce hold on his speeches and writings, they argue, that is so disturbing.

After Henry Hampton, producer of the acclaimed television documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, used footage of the “I Have a Dream” speech, the King estate demanded payment. Hampton told me he offered the estate \$100,000 to avoid a public fight, but they wanted more—“an enormous amount of money,” he said. “They seemed to have the notion that millions of dollars were available.”

The dispute, which was eventually settled out of court for less than \$100,000, kept PBS from re-airing the show during Black History Month in 1993. Jones told me this spring that Hampton’s firm, Blackside, Inc., had been “self-righteous and arrogant” and that the action had been taken against Hampton because videos of *Eyes on the Prize* were being sold in stores around the country. The same rationale is being used in the estate’s suit against CBS, which featured the “I Have a Dream” speech in a nine-hour documentary, “The 20th Century with Mike Wallace,” which is being sold as home videos for \$99.95. CBS used its own footage of the speech in its video, but because the network is using the speech for a commercial purpose, copyright lawyers say it is a debatable issue that has yet to be resolved by the courts.

The vigilance enriches the Kings, but to many it cheapens Dr. King’s memory. As John Lewis argued at the outset of the controversy, peddling the “I Have a Dream” speech is “like selling the Gettysburg Address. Dr. King’s legacy shouldn’t be up for sale like soap.” ☐